

It's Not About You, It's About The Patient!

PART 4 OF 4

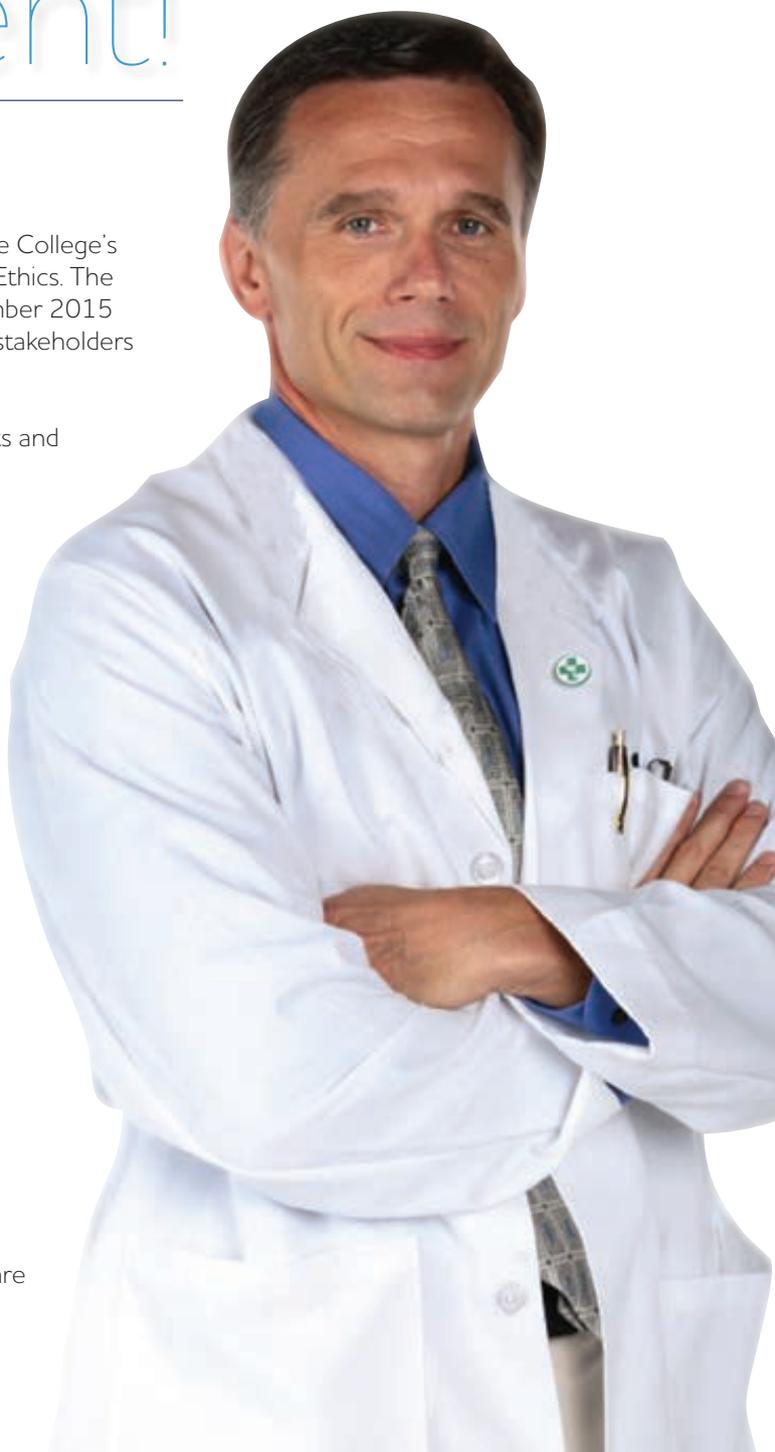
This article is the last in a four-part series about the College's recent initiative to revise the profession's Code of Ethics. The new Code was approved by Council at their December 2015 meeting after extensive collaboration with various stakeholders and public consultation.

The new Code, which is applicable to all pharmacists and pharmacy technicians in Ontario, regardless of where they practice or work, is comprehensive, and brings together concepts from the previous Code, the Standards of Practice, the Principles of Professional Responsibility, and relevant legislation.

The new Code provides pharmacy professionals with a solid framework to understand their ethical obligations as it aligns with core principles of healthcare ethics, which all healthcare professionals are bound by. All pharmacists and pharmacy technicians must use these principles — not their own beliefs or values — to inform their behaviour and conduct, and serve as a compass for their actions and decision-making in practice. As a reminder, the four core principles of healthcare ethics that the new Code is founded on are:

- 1. Beneficence**
- 2. Non-maleficence**
- 3. Respect for persons/justice**
- 4. Accountability (fidelity)**

Abiding by these principles is not optional. In fact, understanding and committing to them is part of your overriding role and responsibility as a healthcare professional.





A QUICK RECAP

Each article in this four-part series about the Code of Ethics discussed these core principles of healthcare ethics. The first article in the series — “What’s Ethics Got To Do With It?” — explained the origins of the principles and offered brief definitions of each. The second article — “Revising Our Code of Ethics...Why Now?” — examined how and why the College used these principles as the foundation in the development of the new Code.

The third article, “Is It Enough to ‘Do No Harm?’”, examined beneficence and non-maleficence in depth. The article provided detailed definitions for these first two core ethical principles, explained how they work in tandem, and examined some of the specific responsibilities of pharmacy professionals when it comes to both benefiting patients and preventing harm.

As a quick recap, beneficence refers to a healthcare professional’s responsibility to actively and positively serve and benefit their patients and society — to help their patients get better. Non-maleficence, on the other hand, is about a healthcare professional’s obligation to be diligent in efforts to do no harm and, whenever possible, to prevent harm from occurring.

The third article asked pharmacy professionals to consider if they spend just as much time and attention to applying the principle of beneficence as they do with non-maleficence. For example, a pharmacist might ensure a prescription has been filled accurately, check that the patient has no known drug allergies and verify that there are no known contraindications for the medication— the pharmacist has applied the principle of non-maleficence and was diligent to ensure no harm will come to the patient. But, did the pharmacist spend the same time and attention ensur-

ing that the prescription is actually what the patient needs, that the therapy will help the patient, and that it will optimize the patient’s health outcomes?

PART FOUR

This article will discuss the last two foundational principles of healthcare ethics that the new Code is founded on — respect for persons/justice and accountability (also known as fidelity). However, it’s important to remember that all of these principles work together, and as we discuss respect for persons/justice and accountability in this article, we will inevitably be drawn back to the discussions about beneficence and non-maleficence. Ultimately, practitioners need to internalize and use these principles to inform their actions and decisions in practice. It will be the application and implementation of these principles that will ensure patients receive safe, effective and ethical pharmacy services.

WHAT IS RESPECT FOR PERSONS/JUSTICE

As outlined in the Code, the ethical principle of respect for persons/justice refers to your dual obligation as a healthcare professional to respect and honour the intrinsic worth and dignity of every patient as a human being, and to treat all patients fairly and equitably.

The Code outlines standards that describe the specific actions and behaviours expected of you in order to demonstrate your commitment to this foundational principle. For example, you must recognize the vulnerability of patients, value their autonomy and dignity, and treat them with sensitivity, care, consideration and respect. Although these sound reasonable, and support a societal

New Code of Ethics Now in Effect.

expectation to “treat others as you would want to be treated yourself”, a scan of complaints raised with regulatory colleges, including OCP, indicates that there is some room for improvement in this area. The recent [Close-Up On Complaints: The Importance of Sensitivity & Communication](#) article featured in the Fall 2015 issue of *Pharmacy Connection* illustrates this point.

Perhaps part of what makes this challenging is, that as a healthcare professional, you must uphold this principle for all patients, in all circumstances — not just for those patients whose values and decisions align with your own. Respecting your patient means that you do not allow your views about a patient’s personal life, religious beliefs, or other morally irrelevant factors such as race, gender, identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, marital status, etc. influence how you treat the patient or affect the quality of care you provide.

You also demonstrate your commitment to this principle when you obtain patient’s consent, uphold their confidentiality, and respect their autonomy to make their own decisions about their healthcare. This includes their right to accept or refuse services and their right to choose the pharmacy and/or pharmacy professional they wish to receive services from.

IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU, IT’S ABOUT THE PATIENT!

The last fundamental principle of healthcare ethics that the new Code is founded on is accountability (also known as fidelity). This principle requires you to be a responsible and faithful custodian of the public trust, accountable not just for your own actions and behaviours, but for those of your colleagues as well.

As explained in the Code, this principle directly ties pharmacists and pharmacy technicians to the professional promise that all healthcare professionals share — to always and invariably act in the best interest of your patient, not your own. This concept of putting someone else ahead of yourself is not easy to consistently uphold, but is at the core of your ethical obligation as a healthcare professional.

As this principle is overarching, the specific standards

included in the Code cover a range of responsibilities and are divided into three sections:

1. **General responsibilities**
2. **Participate in ethical business practices**
3. **Avoid conflict of interest**

For the purposes of this article, let’s explore a few of these more closely.

“DUTY TO REPORT” PROFESSIONAL INCOMPETENCE OR UNETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

One of the standards (4.10) under the accountability principle states that you are responsible to “report professional incompetence or unethical behaviour by colleagues or other healthcare professionals to the appropriate regulatory authority.” Lets consider the following situation to illustrate the application of this standard in practice. Assume that you work for a corporation as a pharmacy manager. You have strong evidence to support the fact that one of your staff pharmacists has engaged in unethical behaviour. What do you do? Report them to head office? Terminate their employment?

In many jobs, reporting the employee or terminating their employment may be enough. But, as a healthcare professional your obligation extends beyond that. By releasing this individual from your employment, you may have protected the patients at your pharmacy from any future unethical conduct from this individual — but what about other patients?

Being a responsible and faithful custodian of the public trust means that — like all other healthcare professionals — your obligation to protect the best interest of patients extends to all patients and, in fact, to society at large. This can be challenging because in situations like the one described here, you are required to formalize a report to the regulatory College about the conduct of this colleague.

Upholding your responsibility and duty to report is particularly important in circumstances where there is a significant breach of patient trust, such as an incident of sexual abuse. In cases like these, your duty to report is not only ethical, but also legal.

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YOUR PRIMARY COMMITMENT IS TO DIRECTLY BENEFITING PATIENTS

As pointed out in the Code of Ethics the most important feature or characteristic that distinguishes a healthcare professional from another type of professional is that healthcare professionals are committed, first and foremost, to the direct benefit of their patients and only secondarily to making a profit.

This doesn't mean that pharmacies are expected to operate without making a profit. It means that the actions and decisions that pharmacists and pharmacy technicians make must consider their patient's best interests first. The patient's interest must come before the interests of the pharmacy professional, their business, or their employer's business.

Given how closely entwined the profession of pharmacy is with retail business, it's likely not surprising to learn that a significant number of the concerns raised to the College are related to allegations that a practitioner has put their own interests, or those of their business, ahead of their patients.

This line can easily blur, as it's not always our natural tendency to think of others first. Often, if a person has to make a decision that could affect someone else, they start by considering what works best for them, and then they consider if the other person would be okay with their decision. While this approach might be acceptable for a business owner who is juggling the needs of their business with the desires of their customers, it is not appropriate for a healthcare professional.

As a healthcare professional, your obligation is first and foremost to consider the best interests of your patient ahead of your own. Your own considerations, or those of the business, should not influence your thought process at all, and should certainly not frame your thinking. Adopting the mantra – it's not about me, it's about the patient – may be an effective way of ensuring that you always begin your thought process with the right end in mind.

AVOIDING CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Finally, under the principle of accountability, the Code deals with the challenge of conflict of interest, and reminds practitioners to avoid situations that are or may reasonably be perceived to be a conflict of interest.

Standard (4.29) outlines the responsibility pharmacists and pharmacy technicians have to “declare any personal or professional interests and inform the relevant party(s) if they are involved in a real, perceived or potential conflict of interest and resolve the situation in the best interests of the patient and public safety as soon as possible”.

While avoiding conflict of interest is not always possible, ensuring that you appropriately identify and manage these situations is critical to your ability to remain an objective decision-maker. Avoiding dual relationships whenever possible, and limiting treatment of yourself and members of your immediate family to minor conditions and emergency circumstances only (unless another appropriate healthcare professional is not readily available), are examples of how to manage conflict.

LEARNING RESOURCES

The College is currently developing a number of e-learning modules to support pharmacists and pharmacy technicians in understanding and applying the new Code of Ethics. The modules will cover key concepts and principles from the Code, and will use video case studies to illustrate the application of the Code in practice. The first of these modules is expected to be available this spring, with the full series complete by the fall. Stay tuned to *Pharmacy Connection* and e-Connect for more information. 📺